

Discover The Church

It is clear that God has designed the church to be a part of his plan for this world. He created it and he works through it. But exactly where does the church fit into God's plan and how can the church aid us in our spiritual growth?

What is the Church?

The very concepts of church attendance and church membership, lead one to the conclusion that the church is an institution or organization where one attends and belongs. This, however, is somewhat of a misrepresentation, because the biblical concept of the church is rather that the church is a community, or assembly of Christian believers. The church is more about the people than the institution. We must never confuse the church with a building, a denomination or a leadership structure.

The New Testament word for church is *ekklhsia* (*ekklesia*) and is best translated as "assembly". Therefore the nature of the church is the gathering or assembling together of God's people. This is further evidenced in the various biblical images of the church.

The Church is the Body of Christ:

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

We are all baptized into one body, the church, the body of Christ. This symbol indicates that the church is a group of people working together as parts of a body work together.

The Church is the Temple of God

1 Peter 2:5

you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Again we have the emphasis on individual parts being joined into a greater whole. The church is like a temple or house that is constructed from a variety of stones.

Therefore the essence of the church is the coming together of individual believers into a greater whole. The church is the people. The church is the people of God in relationship with one another.

Why the Church?

The church is comprised of individual believers coming together like parts of a body or stones in a house. Is this gathering together optional? One might argue that individual salvation is primary and the corporate fellowship is not essential. There are, however, several indications that although God does desire individuals to be saved, he intends that individuals are saved into a community of believers.

1. **The Divine Nature:** God has always existed in a community of love. Before creation, Father Son and Holy Spirit existed in a loving relationship. As beings created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) we are created as social beings. We were created to be in relationship with God and others. Therefore the church as community is a participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4) The church reflects the character of loving triune God.
2. **Our Destiny:** The picture of our future, is one of a corporate participation in the presence of God. All believers together are pictured as the bride of Christ and our future existence is described as living together in the presence of God. (Revelation 21:1-4) Therefore, the church as community is a foretaste of God's wonderful plan for humanity.
3. **Common Headship:** All believers find their essential unity in their common confession of Jesus as Lord. Galatians 3:28 says that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." 1 Corinthians 12:13 says that "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body..." All believers are essentially united in one body with Jesus as the Head. The church as community is therefore a picture of this spiritual reality.
4. **The Church Nurtures Faith:** Salvation occurs in relationships and not in isolation. God works through people. Therefore although the church may only exist because individuals gather together, individual Christians only exist, because of the Church. The community of believers exists to encourage faith love and obedience. As Hebrews 10:24-25 says "let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another... Therefore the church as community is important in the nurturing of faith in individuals.
5. **The Mandate of the Church:** The church exists for a purpose. Ultimately that purpose is to glorify God, but this finds expression in three primary tasks, worship, edification and evangelism. Edification is the building up of believers in their faith and as we mentioned above (Hebrew 10:24-25), this task can only be accomplished in community. Evangelism and worship can be done by individuals, but both find their fullest expression in teamwork. We are told in Matthew 18:19-20 that there is a special presence of the Lord where two or three gather in Christ's name. Furthermore, the image of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 shows that ministry is designed to be done through people working together. We

all have different gifts and we all need each other. Therefore only the church in community can minister effectively.

God invented the church. He desires that individuals are saved into a community of faith. This community reflects God nature, is a foretaste of glory and is a testimony to the Lordship of Christ. Furthermore, the corporate body is designed by God to be effective in carrying out God's will in ministry.

Therefore church attendance (as defined by gathering together with other believers) is not optional, but is central to God's design. Moreover, through the encouragement of others we will be strengthened in our individual relationship with God.

What is Your Part to Play?

Flowing out of the idea that the church is a body is the idea that we each are a different part of the body and each have a different role to play.

1 Corinthians 12:14-18

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

As a part of the church, God has designed you to be a part of what he is doing through the church. God's desire is that we be active in the world and in the church so that we can glorify God. The good news is that through the Holy Spirit God gives us each different gifts and abilities. God is not calling you to do anything that he has not enabled you to do.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. 7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

We are all to contribute to the common good, but we each do it in a different way. Keep in mind that when we serve, we are not serving the institution of the church, we are working with the people of the church to serve others.

Local Church Membership

In our day and age, church membership is often distinguished from church attendance. In one sense, all believers are members of the church by their faith in Christ. On the other hand, individual congregations often have a more technical meaning to the idea of church membership. In this context, church membership refers to an explicit commitment to a local congregation, which is often accompanied by the right to participate in the decision making process and leadership of that congregation.

At Courtenay Fellowship Baptist Church, all people are welcome to attend the church and even participate in many aspects of ministry within the church. On the other hand, certain leadership roles are only available to those who are received into membership.

The Biblical Principle behind this form of local church membership, is the principle of congregational leadership. We believe that because all believers are equal before the Lord as priests (1 Peter 2:5) and that all believers receive the Holy Spirit and are gifted by God for ministry (1 John 2:27 ; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11), that all believers in a local church are responsible to share in the leadership of the church. In our church the membership exercises this leadership by their participation in making decisions at church business meetings and by establishing a leadership team to govern the church. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that the leaders of a church should uphold certain spiritual standards. (See for instance 1 Timothy 3) Local church membership is therefore one aspect by which a local congregation can protect the church from error by the setting of standards. Local church membership is therefore designed to facilitate congregational leadership and to set standards for that leadership.

From an individual perspective, church membership gives you an opportunity to participate in the leadership and decision making of the church. Furthermore, the commitment to church membership invites personal accountability. As one publicly joins a church in membership, they are declaring themselves accountable to their fellow members. Therefore membership comes with the responsibility to participate in the affairs of the church and the benefit of the mutual support of other members.

Local church membership protects the church from error through the setting of standards and acts as a protective covering for the individual through mutual accountability.

Our church Bylaws (Article II Section B) state how someone may become a member of our church.

Any person, upon confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, having been baptized by immersion as a believer and affirming the Constitution and Bylaws of Courtenay Fellowship Baptist Church, may become a member upon written application to the Board of Deacons.

The candidate for membership shall be examined by at least two members of the Board of Deacons and shall be admitted into membership upon a majority vote of eligible members present at any church business meeting.

Discussion Questions:

What things do you miss out on if you do not gather with other believers?

In what way has God given you gifts and abilities?

What opportunities are available for serving others through this church.

Have you considered joining Courtenay Baptist as a church member?